

# Aux armes, comédiens!

---

Viktor Z. Kazai

2020-09-07T13:06:47

The revolutionary spirit has returned to Budapest: as a symbolic response to the attacks on the freedom of the arts and sciences the students of the University for Theater and Film Arts decided to [blockade](#) the main entrance of their institution. The [resistance](#) was sparked by the Fidesz government's decision to "privatize" the university and to delegate the rights of control to a foundation established by the state. As it was suspected from the beginning, the decision-making body of this foundation was packed with government appointees loyal to the Orbán regime and it is presided by [Attila Vidnyánszky](#), the government's ultimate factotum in the field of performing arts.

The whole leadership of the university and several professors, including Ildikó Enyedi, a [winner](#) of the 2017 Berlin International Film Festival, resigned. This step was followed by many symbolic gestures, such as the Hungarian director, Kornél Mundruczó's [posing](#) for photographers at the Venice Film Festival wearing a "#FreeSZFE" T-shirt (SZFE = University for Theater and Film Arts). Encouraged by the support of many foreign theaters and international organizations, such as the [European Film Academy](#), thousands of demonstrators formed a [human chain](#) Sunday afternoon between the university and the parliament to [protest](#) government steps seen as diminishing the institution's autonomy.

## Caught in the crossfire

To understand the constitutional significance of this case, we need to put it into context. The Fidesz government relentlessly tries to undermine freedom of the arts and sciences, a perfect illustration of this trend is the example of the University for Theater and Film Arts. This institution has been in a particularly vulnerable position because it has been the target of both the Orbán regime's attacks on academic freedom and the government's [culture war](#) waged against the so-called "leftist-liberal forces".

## Attacks on academic freedom

The Fidesz government has such a long history of curtailing academic freedom that it is practically impossible to give a full list of all the relevant political and legal measures in a short blog post. But let me mention a few milestones. One of the very first decisions which shocked the academic community was the [reduction](#) of the [financial autonomy](#) of higher education institutions and the eventual introduction of the "chancellor system" together with the establishment of the consistory in 2014-15. As a [result](#) of this reform the competence of the university's senate in budgetary matters has become significantly limited by the rights of the chancellor, who is appointed by the Prime Minister and is responsible for the operation of

the institution. In addition, the basic strategic decisions, and the control of the universities' economic activities belong to the competence of the consistory which is also dominated by government appointees.

The next spectacular show of force was the [amendment to the act on higher education](#) in early 2017 which made the continuous operation of Central European University – a private institution founded by the Orbán government' number one enemy, George Soros – in Budapest impossible. On 5 March 2020, more than two years after the European Commission's referral of the case to the Court of Justice of the European Union, AG Kokott [concluded](#) in her [opinion](#) that the Hungarian legislation was contrary to the law of the EU. With most of the academic staff and the students already relocated to Vienna, we are still waiting for the justices in Kirchberg to find some time to finally decide the case.

In early August 2018, members of the Hungarian Rector's Conference received a letter from the Ministry of Human Capacities asking them to comment on a draft government decree in a day. One of the provisions hidden in the document simply revoked all permissions given to the MA programs in gender studies. In other words, as part of its ideological fight against liberal values and "[gender ideology](#)" – as it is called by prominent politicians of the governing majority –, the Fidesz government [banned](#) MA programs in gender studies.

Then came in 2019 the [radical reorganization](#) of the structure and financing of the research, development and innovation system. The most controversial issue was the deprivation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) of its research network and the strengthening of the government's influence in financing research activities. The Presidium of the HAS issued a [press release](#) shortly after the adoption of the law saying that

"The Hungarian Academy of Sciences regretfully acknowledges the fact that despite the undivided disapproval of the Hungarian and international scientific communities and the researchers of the Academy, the Hungarian Parliament has passed the law (...) After the enactment of the new law the oldest, most reputable and internationally recognized scientific organization of the country will be deprived from its research network. This decision is especially disappointing because it has been made without any meaningful criticism or a legitimate government strategy on the new research system."

And finally, we can talk about the current reform which directly concerns the University for Theater and Film Arts. As part of his master plan to completely reorganize the Hungarian higher education system, [László Palkovics](#), Minister of Innovation and Technology, has launched the process of "[privatization](#)" of certain state universities. Encouraged by the example of the Corvinus University – which served as a pilot project –, the government decided to apply a similar model to several other higher education institutions, including the University for Theater and Film Arts. These institutions would still be financed by the state, but the control of their operation would be delegated to a foundation. The board of the foundation would have the right – among others – to adopt the budget of the university, to approve its internal regulation and to exercise influence on the selection of the

rector. In theory, this new system could even enhance the autonomy of universities in a healthy democracy. However, we can already see that the boards of the foundations controlling the recently privatized higher education institutions are full of government appointees supporting the Orbán regime.

## The government's culture war

According to the narrative adopted by intellectuals loyal to the Orbán regime, Christian-conservative artists and values have been constantly [repressed](#) by the “leftist-liberal” elite since the fall of the socialist dictatorship. Therefore, to “remedy this unfairness” the incumbent governing parties have no other choice but to redistribute cultural positions and resources. This culture war ([summarized](#) by the Hungarian Network of Academics) has been fought on multiple fronts: from media policy to education, from symbolic politics to cultural heritage. But let me focus here exclusively on the measures directly concerning the theater arts.

One of the most straightforward strategies of the Orbán government was to simply capture cultural institutions. This is why the managers of many theatres in cities dominated by Fidesz have been replaced by people whose worldview is compatible with the Orbán regime. The most symbolic gesture was the replacement of the director of the National Theater with Attila Vidnyánszky.

A more complicated but not more subtle tactic chosen by Fidesz was to establish cultural institutions mirroring the already existing ones “controlled by the leftist-liberal elite”. This is how the [Hungarian Academy of Arts](#) (HAA) was created which proudly declared its national commitment and conservative views. The HAA has been elevated to the same constitutional status as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, has been empowered to carry out certain state functions and to exercise influence over the distribution of state-awards. In a very similar vein, the Hungarian Theatrum Society – founded already in 2008 by theaters led by conservative management sharing Orbán's political vision about a specific national approach – has rapidly gained influence after 2010 in the field of state funding and education.

Artistic freedom does not really mean much without money and the Hungarian theaters depend heavily on state subsidies. The National Cultural Fund, the organization responsible for the distribution of financial resources on the basis of tenders, is one of the most important sources of financial support. This is why the restructuring of the Fund guaranteeing the dominance of government delegates and the representatives of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (see above) was very problematic. What is more, the special corporate tax support system – originally designed to provide extra source of financial support in addition to state subsidies – was [reregulated](#) by Fidesz making it much more difficult for theater companies to secure financial resources for their continuous operation and leaving them more exposed to the mercy of the government.

So far gaining foothold in the University for Theater and Film Arts has proven impossible for the Fidesz government. This is why [Attila Vidnyánszky](#) first settled for the country's new but quite successful academy at the University of Kaposvár.

But it was not enough. He wanted everything. He wanted the National Theater, the Hungarian Academy of Arts and the Hungarian Theatrum Society. And now he is eager to conquer the University for Theater and Film Arts.

## **Peace negotiation should be off the table**

The strategy of the Fidesz government is always to shoot first and negotiate later. And even the negotiation serves no other purpose than to distract the wounded person until he eventually dies. This is what those academics and political stakeholders who constantly encourage dialogue with the Hungarian government in order to mitigate the consequences of illiberal reforms are unable (or unwilling) to understand. And the same exact strategy is followed in this case.

The Fidesz government rejects every allegation of undue political pressure, calls upon the faculty and the students to enter into dialogue and accuses them of acting under the influence of the opposition parties. The hypocrisy of the government is obvious given the fact that all the previous suggestions and recommendations of the university's leadership were completely ignored. The faculty and the students were practically given an ultimatum. Fortunately, the citizens of the university seem to be determined and we can only hope that this time the Orbán government does not succeed in bringing them to their knees.

